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CULTURAL POWER AND UTOPIANISM IN
LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON'S *PROM* AND M.T. ANDERSON'S *FEED*

by

LEAH DINATALE

(Under the Direction of Richard Flynn)

ABSTRACT

Resourcefully and responsibly obtaining a sense of power is central to quality young adult literature. Laurie Halse Anderson's *Prom* and M.T. Anderson's *Feed* show their adolescent protagonists' struggles with identity formation, consumerism, and the adult world. In order to address power relationships, the two novels address the rise of a global electronic and print media system that collapses traditional notions of time and space and the excessive consumption associated with the culture such a system creates. However, these two novels explore postmodern consumer culture from different perspectives. *Prom* functions as a utopian, revisionist fairy tale in which the consequences of rampant consumerism are combated through individual agency and sustained community involvement, whereas *Feed* acts as an apocalyptic dystopia in which any quest for agency is thwarted by the rampant consumerism connected to the rise of a transnational, info-age economy. The extent to which these two novels fit within the theoretical framework of utopian/dystopian fiction illuminates their disparate approaches to the power struggles associated with the culture industry.

INDEX WORDS: Young Adult Literature, Utopias, Dystopias, Laurie Halse Anderson, M.T. Anderson

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Momma and Daddy. Thank you for teaching me to love to read at an early age.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THE CULTURAL POWER OF FANTASY: FAIRY TALES AND

UTOPIAN/DYSTOPIAN FICTION

Walk through any supermarket in America and it is impossible to escape them – the glossy, brightly colored issues of *Seventeen*, *US Weekly*, and *Your Prom* are everywhere. These magazine covers show everything from the trendiest dress to wear to prom this spring to which infamously out-of-control celebrity attended a wild party last weekend at Les Deux nightclub in Los Angeles. Any and every hip girl I knew at fifteen had at least one subscription to these magazines. In all honesty, I still remember the thrill I felt when I found my monthly issue of *Seventeen* in my mailbox at the beginning of every month. Opening the magazine, I felt popular and in the know. I became a Hollywood insider even though I grew up in the distinctly Southern city of Savannah, Georgia. I fantasized about being a pop star and I learned exactly which lip gloss and shoes to buy so I could look just like Britney Spears; in other words, I felt temporarily empowered. I was definitely learning how to be cool.

Although that was almost ten years ago, not much has changed. In fact, it is more difficult than ever to divorce youth culture from consumer culture. Akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods through television, radio, and magazine, the “culture industry,” a term coined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, refers to the constellation of entertainment businesses that blur the lines between art, advertising, and propaganda. Fueled by mass technology, the culture industry transforms art into commodities and equates power and control with consumerism. This “art” serves the status quo, creating a state of mind in consumers in which the desire for pleasure is simultaneously activated yet deferred in an endless cycle of

mindless entertainment. Through this cycle, the culture industry cultivates false needs and impossible desires for young women. By commodifying feminine identity through consumption, beauty, and romance, the culture industry offers teens the illusion of power. By using the right combination of commodities ranging from inexpensive hair care products to dresses costing hundreds of dollars, adolescent girls learn from a young age that they gain the ability to refashion their identities through the passive consumption of products.

Although the culture industry is undoubtedly a major site of ideological production for young adults (both males and females), it is unreasonable and wrongheaded to assume that all teenaged consumers of popular culture are passive suckers, as Horkheimer and Adorno's concept may initially imply. Instead, teenagers make their *own* meaning from the vast repertoire of products afforded them by the culture industry. This process both empowers subordinate world views as it resists more dominant ones. However, popular culture is far from exclusively subversive. Explaining the contradictory nature of popular culture, John Storey asserts:

To deny the passivity of consumption is not to deny that sometimes consumption is passive; to deny that consumers are cultural dupes is not to deny that the culture industries seek to manipulate. But it is to deny that popular culture is little more than a degraded landscape of commercial and ideological manipulation, imposed from above in order to make profit and secure social control. (69)

Therefore, analyzing the way in which popular culture shapes power relationships in society requires careful study of the consumption of commodities by teens, as it provides insight into the way meaning is made during the moment of consumption. This meaning equates to power – the power for teens to think beyond the confines of a passive present to an active political future.

Resourcefully and responsibly obtaining a sense of power is central to quality young adult literature. Laurie Halse Anderson's *Prom* and M.T. Anderson's *Feed* show their adolescent protagonists' struggles with identity formation, consumerism, and the adult world. In order to address power relationships, the two novels address the rise of a global electronic and print media system that collapses traditional notions of time and space and the excessive consumption associated with the culture such a system creates. However, these two novels explore postmodern consumer culture from different perspectives. *Prom* functions as a utopian, revisionist fairy tale in which the consequences of rampant consumerism are combated through individual agency and sustained community involvement, whereas *Feed* acts as an apocalyptic dystopia in which any quest for agency is thwarted by the rampant consumerism connected to the rise of a transnational, info-age economy. The extent to which these two novels fit within the theoretical framework of utopian/dystopian fiction illuminates their disparate approaches to the power struggles associated with the culture industry.

In order to locate *Feed* and *Prom* within the subgenre of utopian/dystopian fiction, it is important to first define the broader concept of fantasy and understand how it operates within the public sphere. Jack Zipes asserts that the definition of fantasy has a myriad of countless meanings, as there is only a vague consensus concerning what the word actually means. Zipes notes that there are several significant meanings historically attached to the word, its roots stemming from Greek, Latin, and Old French. Originally meaning to show or make visible, the word now means anything from "the mental apprehension of an object of perception" to "a supposition that does not rest on solid ground" or merely a caprice (79).

In terms of the public sphere, Zipes maintains that "Fantasy mobilizes and instrumentalizes the fantastic to form and celebrate spectacles that exist and have always existed

– illusions of social exploitation based on power” (77). This power is the foundation upon which coercive social relations, and the unchecked commodification that result from it, are glorified. Such unrestrained power often results in a fetishism abetted by the latest technology. While this technology connects us to each other in “fantastic” ways, it also alienates us from our thoughts and feelings (77). Seeking pleasure, we project our fantasies onto reality, endeavoring to realize wishes and desires, often at the expense of the marginalized and disenfranchised. This tension between the corporate determination of the fantastic and individual desire frequently manifests itself in art dependent upon the fantastic (78). However, art often, specifically science fiction and other forms of the fantastic in the art world, cannot keep pace with what Zipes terms “the incredible credibility of the real,” or the fantastic nature of real events occurring in the 21st century (78). Fantasy’s ability to blur representation from reality can indeed be very dangerous.

On the other hand, true fantasy provides a space for critical reflection and spiritual regeneration. It is closely associated with originality, imagination, and the ability of the artist to create something artistic out of nothing. Furthermore, it is political, providing a mode of negation to fetishized mass commodities. Fantasy offers us the power to reassess our values and an alternative to determining social forces. After all, as Jack Zipes argues, “It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more” (“Why Fantasy Matters” 78). Fantasy endows us with the ability to imagine a different world while at the same time providing us with the power to change it.

Because of such a distinct contradiction, Zipes continues, fantasy indeed “[betrays] us even while it nourishes us and gives us hope that the world can be a better place” (78):

Nevertheless, there is a quality of hope and faith in serious fantasy

literature and films that offsets the mindless violence and banality and contrived exploitation that we encounter in the spectacles of everyday life. If fantasy can be subversive and resistant to existing social conditions, then it wants to undermine what passes for normality, to expose the contradictions of civil society, and to right the world out-of-joint in the name of humanity. (82)

The hope for a better world situates itself in the tenuous space between corporate determination of the fantastic and the individual projection of desire. As a result, we create subversive works of art that are dependent upon the fantastic in order to protest the injustice all around us; in other words, we create utopian and dystopian fiction.

Notoriously difficult to define, utopian/dystopian fiction finds its roots in Sir Thomas Moore's 1516 treatise, *Utopia*. Discussing the nature of Moore's imagined perfect society, Zipes notes, "Utopia is an imaginary island with a perfect social and political system in which everyone is treated fairly" ("Foreword" x). Because this perfect state does not and arguably cannot exist, utopia has come to be defined as an ideal place or state. It is also sometimes defined as any visionary system of political or social perfection. As a result, it is often associated with "idealistic dreaming and unrealistic thinking" ("Foreword" x). Despite the negative connotation the word sometimes carries, Bedford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum argue "that utopian thinking both draws upon and generates ideas capable of influencing cultural, economic, and political practices" (2). Thus, utopian thought links the hope for a better tomorrow to the reality of the present.

Much of the thought regarding the relationship between hope, reality, and utopia is credited to German philosopher Ernst Bloch's foundational work, *The Principle of Hope*. Originally published in 1938, *The Principle of Hope* argues dissatisfaction with real life

experiences is at the root of our longings for utopia. When we realize there is something missing in our lives or we recognize social injustice around us, we create works of art that present alternatives to our formidable future. These images of a more favorable future provide glimmers of hope, shedding light onto ways to create a more perfect society.

In terms of situating young adult literature within the subgenre of adult utopian fiction, Zipes notes that there has always been a utopian element to children's literature, dating back to its origins in the eighteenth century:

It would be misleading to argue that every story written for children is utopian, or to assert there is an "essential" utopian nature to writing for young people. There is, however, a utopian tendency of telling and writing in general that helps explain why it is we feel so compelled to create and disseminate tales and why we are enthralled by particular stories. The tales, novels, poems, and plays that incorporate this utopian tendency stem from a lack we feel in our lives, a discernable discontentment, and a yearning for a better condition or world.

("Foreword" ix)

Perhaps the most interesting and important utopian literary works not only originate from such a place of deep discontent, but also focus on the present. In contemporary utopian writing, young readers must confront the establishment of the adult world and position themselves within it. Utopian fiction presents the possibility that young readers have the power to change the wrongs created by adult societies.

Because texts such as Laurie Halse Anderson's *Prom* "restore miraculous power to human beings," there is an implicit hope for a better world within them ("Foreword" xi). *Prom* suggests that a self-proclaimed "normal kid" from an impoverished neighborhood just outside

Philadelphia has the power to change her world. As James Blasingame remarks, “Normal, by [Ashley’s] definition, means no aspirations for college after high school and no plans for anything more than what she sees in her neighborhood.” (71). Although Ashley initially lacks self-determination and initiative, she ultimately rejects the culture industry’s insistence on wanton consumption. Through her active resistance in shaping her own identity, Ashley not only creates a better world for herself, but improves her community.

There is an intricate link between utopia and dystopia. Critics differ in their definitions of utopia, as it is impossible to rely solely on genre because the forms utopian works take vary considerably. Discussing the genre of utopian fiction, Hintz and Ostry ask the question –

Does a text’s utopian status lie within the form of the work, the thematic message of the work, the intention of the author to portray an ideal or nightmarish world, the intentions and beliefs held by the characters who live in a fictional society, or the response of the reader? (3)

Because of such ambiguity in the genre, Hintz and Ostry describe utopia as a, “nonexistent society that is posited as significantly better than that of the reader” (3). Utopias “[strive] toward perfection, [have] a delineated social system, and [are] described in reasonably specific detail” (3).

In contrast, Hintz and Ostry describe dystopias as “precise descriptions of societies, ones in which the ideals for improvement have gone tragically amok” (3). Therefore, both types of literature form an important discourse about hope; there can be no imagined, hopeful utopia without discontent and the oppositional dystopia. Dystopian fiction thus serves to critique current cultural trends, such as the very real possibility of a posthuman future. In contrast to the optimism presented in utopias, dystopias often explore the double-edge of technological progress

in terms of communication, biological engineering, and transportation. As Bedford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum remark, dystopian children's literature is invariably tied to the prospect of a posthuman future and the genre of science fiction.

In order to begin a discussion of the possibilities of dystopian science fiction, it is important to first define the genre of science fiction itself. Eugene Thacker defines contemporary science fiction as the following: a contemporary mode in which the techniques of extrapolation and speculation are utilized in a narrative form, to construct near-future, far-future or fantastic worlds in which science, technology, and society intersect (156). Although science fiction often exaggerates present-day trends, it is valuable as a form of critique because it offers an imagined imperfect space that invites readers to interrogate the state of their present society.

In his 2001 article "The Science Fiction of Technoscience: The Politics of Simulation and a Challenge for New Media Art," Thacker examines the tenuous relationship between the technosciences (primarily biotechnology and biomedicine) and the genre of science fiction. His article poses a very important question for a globalized world currently grappling with the ethics and biopolitics of privatized human embryonic cloning and computer-based DNA research technologies – In a domain in which the science-fictional future of biotechnology has always already arrived, what functions does or can science fiction have? (156) Because he asserts science fiction constructs narratives of progress along with literal conditions for the research that takes place in the field, Thacker argues that science fiction has the ability to fulfill a potential space of critique. Ultimately, he concludes that science fiction occupies this space "by creating mobile zones whose primary invention is to comment upon, and intervene in, the history of the present." (158) Thacker's assertion is an interesting one, when we consider its implications for young adult literature and the subgenre of dystopian fiction.

Situating science fiction within the context of young adult literature, Joseph O. Milner notes that much of science fiction in general is reactionary, as it “[embodies] a rhetoric that is value laden and urges a rigorous assessment of our culture” (9). Science fiction is a particularly powerful category of young adult literature because “children and young adults are generally in the center of the action or set of concerns, sometimes even bearing the major responsibility for the formation, survival, or reform of the society” (Hintz and Ostry 1). This establishes “a confrontation between the child and the adult world” therefore endowing both adolescent protagonists and readers with a sense of power. Such writing encourages adolescent readers to personally reflect on social behavior and organization while questioning their own society (Hintz and Ostry 1).

M.T. Anderson’s *Feed* is one such example of a science fiction novel in which adolescent readers must critique their compliance in “buying into” the message of the mass media. Framed as an apocalyptic dystopia in which alienation and miscommunication are the norm, Anderson presents a not-too-distant future in which access to the internet is implanted directly into people’s brains. As a result, advertising is fed to them directly. In this dystopian world, the future is a nightmare in which very few people possess their own thoughts. An unmistakable satire of contemporary consumer culture and a transnational, info-age economy, *Feed* provides a savage indictment of “societies which develop an irresponsible attitude towards the use of technology in ways which reduce human beings to resources, products, or consumers” (Bedford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum 166). If hope for the future of society is to be found in *Feed*, it lies outside of the text, with its readers. Violet, the novel’s female protagonist, dies when the Feed Corporation refuses to fix her feed after she does not allow her buying habits to be tracked; resisting the feed is futile.

By dedicating the novel to “all those who resist the feed,” Anderson places his hope and the responsibility of the future squarely in the hands of adolescents, a common trope in young adult dystopian literature. This optimistic faith in children is, as Bedford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum note, “a fragile means for ensuring a better future because it assumes that young people share the same desires as those of social reformists” (183). This is particularly worrisome when we consider the fact that utopian/dystopian young adult literature is often omitted from classroom syllabi. Educators often dismiss young adult literature, claiming it is not “serious” enough for classroom study because it is not generally included in the canon of “great” western literature. However, a more deeply reason for its exclusion may be the fact that young adult literature questions the status quo and causes teens to question the authority of the adult world.

Nevertheless, the hope of educating a new generation of social reformists through utopian literature is not lost. As the academic community has expanded tremendously in recent years, so have ideas about what should be included in the collective literary canon and thus taught in the classroom. Children’s literature (encompassing young adult literature) is now taught in elementary school, high school, and college as literature. Within the past 35 years, there has been a great deal of critical analysis of children’s literature by literary scholars. Scholars and educators alike now recognize that many contemporary children’s texts, utopian fiction in particular, provide interesting theoretical connections to a plethora of pressing social issues and political concerns. As a result, these scholars argue that children’s literature should be read and discussed alongside more traditionally “canonical” works.

As a future educator, I must believe there is hope for the future and the survival of our planet. Young adult utopian/dystopian literature generally refuses to give in to despair and nihilism. *Prom* presents an optimistic view of what our world might be like if we somehow find

the power to resist the message of the culture industry, while *Feed* offers an open, yet undeniable warning of what we can expect if we do not actively protest a manipulative mass media fueled by a global electronic and print media system.

Utopian/dystopian children's fiction does serious political work; there is no such thing as an "innocent" children's novel. The political and ethical questions raised by *Prom* and *Feed* are no less important because of the ages of their intended audiences. They are, perhaps, even more important as these questions are presented to readers still struggling to come to terms with their own subjectivity and the political ideologies of the adult world. Utopian/dystopian young adult literature ultimately endows young readers with the *real* power to change their identities and ultimately their world – the ability to think critically for themselves.

CHAPTER TWO

POWER, RESISTANCE, AND THE UTOPIAN POSSIBILITIES OF THE FAIRY TALE

Today anyone who is incapable of talking in the prescribed fashion, that is of effortlessly reproducing the formulas, conventions and judgments of mass culture as if they were his own, is threatened in his very existence, suspected of being an idiot or an intellectual – Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture” (79)

As a child, I grew up hearing fairy tales and subsequently reading my life into them. One of my favorites was always the story of Cinderella. I read many different versions of the classic tale and imagined what it would be like to wear Cinderella’s glass slippers at a fantastic ball where I would dance with Prince Charming and then live happily ever after. I couldn’t wait until I would become a teenager so this drama-filled fantasy could become a reality; in other words, I couldn’t wait to go to the prom. I was positive Justin Timberlake would be my Prince Charming.

It is impossible to separate the mass-market version of Cinderella from one of the most iconic and commercial of all American phenomena – the high school prom. In contemporary youth culture, prom has become a Cinderella-inspired tale of transformation hijacked by the culture industry through clever advertising in movies, books, and teen magazines. The popular culture adaptation presents a shy young woman who subjects herself to a series of physical changes that culminate in her emergence as a great beauty who gets the man of her dreams while impressing her fellow classmates at the prom. The process of getting ready for this special evening is an enchanted space in which any young woman’s body can be magically reworked by simply using the right combination of commodities.

Because Cinderella has been reinvented by so many different cultures across the world for at least a thousand years, it is no surprise that the culture industry has capitalized on this

much-loved tale. Sometimes cruel and vindictive, at other times compassionate and kind, Cinderella, as Maria Tatar notes, “can appear genteel and self-effacing in one story, clever and enterprising in another, [and] coy and manipulative in a third” (102). America’s Cinderella, laments Jane Yolen, is no longer the shrewd, resourceful heroine of earlier folktales; rather, she has been replaced by a “passive princess” (303). The mass-market American princess, Yolen criticizes, is an “insipid beauty in waiting” that defers to her Prince Charming and relies completely on products to create her social identity. Such appropriation by the culture industry is “a heresy of the worst kind,” and, according to Yolen, “It cheapens our most cherished dreams, and it makes a mockery of the true magic inside us all – the ability to change our own lives, the ability to control our own destinies” (299).

A deliberately deceptive and manipulative mass-media commandeers oral folktales and literary fairy tales in order to use them as civilizing agents to make children of all ages better consumers. Understanding the way fairy tales acculturate children, the culture industry manipulates prescribed notions of “happily ever after” in order to profit from the desire for pleasure and happiness. Despite this fact, fairy tales are a controversial medium for this project, as they are elastic and can subvert the very same agenda. Zipes explains by remarking:

Though there are certainly “totalitarian” aspects of the transformation of the fairy tale, it is more important to grasp the *diverse* ways in which the fairy tale as a genre has been used. The fairy tale has not only been conceived and exploited to manipulate children and adults, it has also been changed in innovative ways to instill hope in its youthful and mature audiences so that no matter how bad their lives are, they can still believe that they can live happily ever after. (6)

Discussing the socializing component of fairy tales, Justyna Deszcz notes, “fairy tales stem from actual struggles over power and hopes to stamp out social conflict by changing dominant social structures. Such struggles and hopes often play themselves out in utopian worlds that take the form of fairy tales” (29). Zipes argues that the utopian characteristics of fairy tales are rooted in the unfulfilled wants and needs of a dissatisfied individual or community at a particular political or historical moment. This dissatisfaction manifests itself in the yearnings for a more satisfactory present. Because utopian ideals are often couched in the language of fairy tales, they can be seen “as a totally rational and natural practice, and as such, they powerfully captivate contemporary audiences” (Zipes, *Breaking* 132). However, fairy tales are controversial in the sense that they “hardly ever chart concrete ways to alter the future and are rather vague in their depictions of what this improved reality will look like” (Zipes, *Breaking* 133). In this way, different versions of the same story have the ability to either reinforce cultural stereotypes and economic myths or destabilize them altogether.

Nineteenth-century writers such as George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll, and Oscar Wilde used the fairy tale as a means to question overly didactic tales and the values of the society which created them (Zipes, *Happily Ever After* 5). The popularity of fairy tales continues into twentieth-first century American culture, albeit through movies, books, and other forms of popular culture, as print culture has quickly surpassed oral folklore in most of the western world. Because of this major change in the way in which stories are told, a twentieth century version of the tale often, as Alan Dundes notes, “[embodies] different values and worldview[s] than those held by earlier oral tellers of the tale” (294). As a result, it is inevitable that the story of Cinderella has changed over the course of time and will continue to change. However, Dundes

argues that it is these changes, both obvious and subtle, “that provide invaluable clues to understanding the world of today” (295).

Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Prom* offers a critique of the postmodern relationship between consumption, beauty, and romance by subverting the popular culture version of Cinderella deeply ingrained in consumer consciousness. In a 2005 interview with James Blasingame, Anderson expresses her ambivalence about the possibility of separating prom from consumer culture: “... [T]he money spent on proms is truly obscene and stupid. I wonder if there are any high schools out there that have thought of deliberately scaling back the glitz. I doubt it” (73). Clearly, it’s hard for Anderson to even imagine a high school in America where teenagers are able to separate pleasure from consumption. Anderson’s doubt highlights the need for an imagined space where gratification may be disconnected from the artificial glamour mass produced by the culture industry; it emphasizes the need for a utopian fairy tale.

By reimagining the narrative space of *Prom* as a utopia free of rampant consumerism and male identification, Anderson manages to transform the trite, popular culture version of Cinderella into a wish-fulfillment that isn’t so empty. Noting the value of earlier folk versions of Cinderella, Yolen remarks, “But in the fairy tales wishes have a habit of happening – *wishes accompanied by the proper action*, bad wishes as well as good. That is the beauty of the old stories and their wisdom as well” (303). Anderson also seems to understand this truth. In *Prom*, this action equates to the power to change one’s own life, the ability to control one’s own destiny without depending on mass-marketed commodities.

The cultural meanings of femininity associated with the prom are disseminated to young girls through products produced by the culture industry. The prom is undoubtedly a feminine space, as feminist sociologist Amy L. Best asserts:

Girls are central players in the production and organization of both the actual prom and the systems of meaning through which the prom comes into being. This is a terrain in which girls have some measure of power and control (though limited) to define the meaning of this space as a romantic one. (93)

Through the false illusion of power and control, young girls are sold what Sydney Eve Matrix calls the “prom mystique” (10). This prom mystique convinces adolescent girls that the prom is a monumental rite of passage into womanhood, although it has only been practiced since World War II (12). Furthermore, it suggests that prom requires weeks of preparation in order to obtain the perfect hair, makeup, attire, and prom date. Evoking the nostalgic motifs and icons of the popular culture Cinderella, the prom mystique convinces adolescent girls that full body and beauty make-overs are absolutely necessary in order for the night to be sufficiently magical and transformative (11).

The very first sentence of *Prom* brings the novel’s satirical agenda to the reader’s attention. The opening line reads: “Once upon a time there was an eighteen-year-old girl who dragged her butt out of bed and hauled it all the way to school on a sunny day in May” (1). Clearly evoking the language of fairy tale while spoofing the magical imagery associated with prom, Anderson’s realism introduces readers to the novel’s plucky protagonist, Ashley Hannigan, a most unlikely princess.

A self-proclaimed “normal kid,” Ashley often wonders why she bothers to continue attending Carceras High, an ethnically diverse, lower-middle class public school just outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. By using the underprivileged Carceras High as the major setting of the novel, Anderson destabilizes the traditional narrative of prom as an exclusively white, suburban cultural occurrence. Commenting on the way in which the culture industry constructs

prom, Best remarks, “While narratives on prom vary, the characters in these films [or other images of prom] rarely do. Representations of youth in prom films are totalizing images; they work to erase class and racial differences among youth” (24). This is a particularly interesting assertion when we consider the origins of prom.

According to Best, proms originated in schools in order to provide a space of social management. By acculturating youth into middle class rituals such as prom, schools gain the ability to authorize the cultural practices of the middle class while subordinating the practices of the youth subculture. Proms consequently secure kids’ consent to the dominant social practices in order to maintain the status quo (163). Although narratives on prom vary, the images of the characters attending them in popular culture rarely do. As Best notes, “Representations of youth in prom films are totalizing images, they work to erase class and racial differences among youth. They rescue the idea that the typical teen is white, suburban, and middle-class” (24). Hence by focusing the novel on the subculture of working class youth, Anderson problematizes the idea that adolescence is a universally shared experience, regardless of race, class, or gender.

Although extremely bright, Ashley is not a good student and is completely uninterested in school activities; no one expects very much from her and as a result, she doesn’t expect much from herself. Neither her teachers nor her parents encourage her to make plans to attend college and, after graduation, she is simply expected to get “get by” (2). In order to make extra money, Ashley works after school as a waitress at EZ-CHEEZ-E (clearly a parody of the franchised Chuck E. Cheese). She dresses in a rat costume and must serve rude and undesirable customers.

Struggling to graduate and otherwise trying to make ends meet, Ashley does not understand the “hype” surrounding prom at Carceras. However, Ashley’s best friend and active prom committee member, Natalia Shulmensky, always has her “nose in another prom

magazine,” and Ashley describes the big night as Nat’s “drug of choice” (21). Best describes the marketing of prom as the quintessential Cinderella story; teen magazines such as *Seventeen* and *Your Prom* construct prom as a “site of romantic possibility, where the promise of sweet love and tender affections are infused to create a magical night” (63). According to Sharon R. Mazzarella, “The rhetorical strategy of these magazines is to build the prom up to be ‘the most wonderful night of your life’ in order to convince young girls to spend exorbitant amounts of money on countless prom products” (98).

Because almost all prom marketing is targeted towards adolescent girls in teen magazines, young women learn to equate power and control with consumerism and physical beautification (Mazzarella 101). Prom itself epitomizes “the expansion of a distinct youth culture and the spending power of youth” (Best 4). Furthermore, “How proms are organized and the forms they take express the increasing influence of the culture industries in schools and, in general, the pervasive force of consumerism in society today” (Best 4).

The language of the advertisement Nat writes to promote the sale of prom tickets reflects the contrived rhetoric of such manipulative marketing:

Prom tickets are still on sale. Thanks to our committee’s hard work, this year’s prom promises to be the biggest extravaganza ever. When you walk into the ballroom of the Hotel Bristol, you’ll be transported to a fantastic world of happy endings and dreams come true. Your ticket entitles you to a three-course buffet dinner, unlimited beverages, cake, prom favors, and, of course, dancing. Let’s make this a night to remember. (11)

Phrases such as, “the biggest extravaganza ever,” “a fantastic world of happy endings and dreams come true,” and “Let’s make this a night to remember” situate Caceras High’s prom

within the realm of fantasy and fairy tale. Mocking the rhetoric of “hyped up” labels for prom night in articles and fashion spreads within teen magazines concerning prom, Anderson highlights the way in which proms are a part of a growing consumer market directed towards youth. In order for the Carceras prom to be “a fantastic world of happy endings and dreams come true,” it is clear that “the ballroom of the Hotel Bristol,” as well as “a three-course buffet dinner, [with] unlimited beverages, cake, [and] prom favors” is absolutely necessary to make the evening “perfect.”

The need to plan an extravagant, perfect prom down to the smallest detail plays into the consumerist ideology that adolescent girls gain the power to reshape their identities through the acquisition of goods. Nat definitely feels she has the power to control her identity by the false sense of power fetishized commodities offer her:

“I don’t know what kind of purse to buy for prom.”

“Oh, God.” I started walking.

“No, Ash, really.” She ran to catch up with me. “The purse makes a statement.

Metallic says ‘hot and independent.’ Beaded says ‘romantic and tender.’ So what am I? It’s not like I have to worry what Jason thinks, but what about the rest of the world?” (13)

Nat believes consumption allows her to express her individuality. She is oblivious to the manipulative rhetoric of prom magazines and other advertising from the culture industry because it gives her the illusion that she is the one in control. She can choose to buy the beaded purse or the metallic one and simultaneously change her identity based upon that purchase. Her buying power is directly correlated with the characteristics of her physical appearance, emphasizing her need to look “perfect.” By lampooning the coercive language of the culture industry through

Nat's conversation with Ashley, Anderson presents the explosive force of consumerism to shape adolescents into a distinctive consumer group.

Despite the fact that her friend is consumed with prom and the commodities associated with it, Ashley contends that Nat's individuality cannot be bought:

She kept me from jumping off the roof when my family went crazy. She helped me babysit my brothers. I helped her babysit her grandmother. She liked penguins, chocolate frosting from a can, sappy poetry, gum, and violin music. I liked TJ. She flirted with dorkdom, but she could be tough, and most people liked her. Nope, they didn't make purses that could say all that. (15)

Ashley understands that merely buying a purse results in nothing more than a pseudo-individuality for Nat – one in which her personal history is erased by the commodity.

Throughout the magazines Nat reads, the overarching theme is that prom is a rite of passage of such immense importance that everything must be perfect. In order to ensure such perfection, she must do everything in her power to avoid a “prom horror story” (Mazzarella 99). The rhetorical purpose of “building prom up to be the ultimate date/evening, and by warning of the potential for disaster,” argues Mazzarella, allows the various editors of teen magazines to establish themselves as dualistic “sage advisors” and “fairy godmothers” (100). By acquiring this position, magazine writers and editors provide teenage girls with “helpful hints, step-by-step guides, and all the commodities to ‘make it a night to remember, not a nightmare [they’d] love to forget’ (100).

Anderson satirizes the overblown rhetoric of such magazines when Nat and the rest of the members of the prom committee learn that their entire prom budget has been stolen by their math teacher, Miss Crane. Such an incident could definitely be featured in the prom horror story

section of *Seventeen* or *Your Prom*. As a play on this familiar trope, Ashley describes her fellow classmates as “a bunch of zombie girls – staring dead ahead [with] mouths hanging open” after learning the news (25).

Although Ashley is not interested in attending the prom, she is sympathetic enough to understand how much prom matters to her friends. She says, “Prom was stupid for me, but not for them, and I wasn’t such a butthead that I couldn’t see the difference” (26). She further realizes that they sincerely believe in the image of prom produced by the culture industry:

I had been saying prom was stupid for years, and it still was, but it was different for them. They had been waiting forever for this. Dichelle, she lived with a foster family who had nothing, but everybody, even the second cousins, had pitched in to buy her a dress and shoes and a sparkly headband that looked like a beauty pageant crown, only not as tacky. Junie had been dating the same stand-up man, Charles, since freshman year, and they were the cutest couple on the planet, and he was going into the army right after graduation, and we were all sure he was going to ask her to marry him at prom. Aisha had been working for free at a braiding shop so she could get her hair done. Monica, her mom died of cancer last – hell, if anyone deserved a dance it was that girl. (26)

Ashley’s compassion reflects Anderson’s own mixed feelings about the “bizarre ritual” of the prom. Acknowledging the positive aspects of prom, Anderson says:

... [P]roms are a wonderful celebration. High school is hard, being a teenager is hard, and they deserve a chance to dress up and party together, to push beyond the envelope of their daily routines and experiment with dressing up and feeling special. (73)

Hence, Anderson recognizes that prom represents one of the few spaces authorized by the school administration in which adolescents can practice being adults, albeit in scripted ways.

Acknowledging the prom as a rite of passage into the adult world, the principal of Carceras High, Mr. Banks, calls a special school assembly when he hears of the stolen prom funds:

I am so sorry that this has happened to you. You all deserve better, much better. I am proud of each one of you in this room. You show up for class, you do your homework. You follow most of the rules, most of the time. Your lives are hard, but you keep showing up, doing what's right, working for a better future. The very least we can do is make sure you have a prom to celebrate. We will do everything we can to make this happen. (30)

Because of her distrust of members of the establishment, Ashley cannot tell if Principal Banks is lying. Her distrust proves to be legitimate when Principal Banks and Vice-principal Gilroy attempt to cancel prom when it appears Nat and the other committee members will not be able to raise enough money to cover the funds that were stolen by Miss Crane. As a result, Ashley finds herself caught up in putting together the Carceras High prom, despite her initial resistance and frustration. Ashley's protest against the establishment of the adult world is an important step in actively shaping her own identity.

Ashley refuses the trappings of commodity culture by suggesting Carceras High hold their prom in the gym instead of at the luxury Hotel Bristol. Ashley's idea is met with resistance from her fellow classmates. Monica, another prom committee member, says, "If it's in the gym, it's just a dance, not a prom" (66). However, Ashley asserts, "So you're saying that what makes a prom is if we spend a ton of money, which we don't have? Pardon my ass, but that's stupid"

(66). When one committee member realizes “[She] can’t get the money back on [her] dress,” and another concedes that “[They] don’t have a choice,” the girls concede to Ashley’s idea (67).

They ultimately decide “It’d be better than nothing” (67).

Using the gym as a substitute for the luxury Hotel Bristol the Carceras High School gym functions as a resource to counter the hegemony of the culture industries. Ashley and the other members of the prom committee begin to think of other creative ways to make sure they are able to put together a prom on a limited budget. One girl suggests, “We could cook for ourselves, or get our families to help. My mom’s macaroni and cheese is famous in our neighborhood” (68). Monica adds, “Or we could just have cookies and stuff” (68). In order to convince members of the administration to donate their time as chaperones or custodians, Nat’s elderly grandmother bakes delicious Russian pastries which Ashley and Nat distribute to the janitors and English teachers. Ashley’s aunts are able to convince a kitchen store to donate napkins, a bookstore to donate gift certificates, and a large department store to donate hundreds of dollars worth of Christmas lights in order to decorate the gym. Although the girls respond to the crisis in conventionally domestic ways, such as by baking cookies, they still manage to “talk back” to a culture industry that has defined them through mass-produced commodities. The girls foster a sense of feminine community and refuse to allow the absence of limousines, luxury hotels, or fancy foods prevent them from having a memorable prom.

In terms of both prom culture and the genre of the fairy tale in general, there is no commodity more important than finding the perfect prom dress. In the popular culture version of Cinderella, Cinderella cannot attend the ball until her fairy godmother creates a beautiful dress out of the rags she is forced to wear. According to the cultural narrative of prom presented in teen magazines, no adolescent girl can attend prom without buying an expensive designer dress

that no other girl at the prom will be wearing. Ascertaining the perfect prom dress provides insight into the ways in which the practices of femininity are exchanged between women, and the way in which one “becomes” a woman through an interaction with a commodity. “More than just a set of frivolous practices of primping,” Best explains that preparations for the prom are “fertile sites of identity negotiation and construction, where girls are making sense of what it means to be women in a culture that treats the surface of the body as the consummate canvas on which to express the feminine self (46).

Finding the perfect prom dress definitely becomes a family affair for Ashley. Her mother and aunts bring over second-hand dresses for her to try on. Although this process annoys Ashley, the “preparations for the prom, while fundamentally being about setting oneself apart, are often a collective process” (Best 41). Best further explains that “The process of getting ready [comes] to represent for many a space of shared experience.” (41). Ashley does not have much luck with the prom dresses her mother and aunts collect, and she is forced to go shopping for a new one with her mother.

More realistic than her mother, Ashley always pays attention to the price of things and refuses to allow her individuality to be reduced to purchasing a dress that no one else at the prom will be wearing.” As her mother looks at an expensive gray silk dress in a department store, Ashley says, “Money, that’s what I need. You don’t make this much in a whole month. We’re wasting our time” (117). Ashley’s mother is eventually able to get a substantial discount on the dress, and she purchases it, much to Ashley’s dismay. However, Ashley’s mother accidentally washes Ashley’s dress with some crayons and ruins it.

This is yet another episode that could easily have been featured in the “prom horror story” section of *Seventeen* or *Your Prom*. Playing on this familiar trope, Anderson uses Ashley’s

kooky neighbor, Nat's Grandmother Shulmensky, instead of an editor of a fashion magazine, to act as a fairy godmother figure to Ashley. Just as Ashley is an improbable Cinderella, Grandma Shulmensky is an unlikely fairy godmother. She suffers from dementia and always wears "a bathrobe and her flowered bathing cap" (44). She hardly wears her dentures and often "[chatters] away like a monkey" while doing "a few steps of her sprinkler dance" (181). Ashley's mother admits that "What she really needs is a nursing home" (45). Because of her age and deteriorating mental condition, it is a huge surprise when Grandma Shulmensky comes to Ashley's rescue, handing her a laundry basket containing a very special, one-of-a-kind prom gown. By employing the fantastic, Anderson projects the utopian possibility of women coming together to help one another in a time of need.

Ashley describes the dress Grandmother Shulmensky makes as "a mountain of fabric, all kinds of chiffon, silk, satin, cotton, and gauze in every shade of pink" (182). The ball gown has "a plunging neckline, an even deeper scooped back, a small waist, and layers of skirts that [flow] to the ground" (182). When Ashley's aunts see her they exclaim, "Will ya look at that!" (182). "A beauty, she's a freakin' beauty." (182). Ashley's mother thinks the dress is "A little weird, maybe," but Aunt Sharon exclaims, "Not weird, original," while Aunt Joan pipes up, "Original like Ashley (183). Ashley's friends at prom think the dress is beautiful, as well. Ashley's friend Aisha asks her, "Where did you get the money for it?" (199). Ashley explains that her neighbor sewed it for her, and her "cheeks hurt from grinning so much" (199). Because Ashley's dress is not a mass-produced commodity like so many other prom dresses, she is able to truly express her own individuality.

Before actually entering her prom inside the gym, Ashley announces, "Once upon a time there was a girl who decided to make it happen" (210). Ashley gains control, power, and

individuality not through the consumption of mass-produced products or commodified self-beautification, but by taking control of her life. Ashley finally does this by protesting vice-principal Gilroy's unfair decision not to bar her from prom because of an excess of unmerited detentions. Furthermore, she attends prom and has a wonderful night without her neglectful and coercive boyfriend, TJ.

When TJ pressures Ashley to leave prom to have sex with him, she refuses. She says, "Hello? Are you crazy? I do too want to be a part of this 'shit.' And I'm keeping the dress on, thank you very much" (193). The argument escalates and ends with Ashley telling TJ, "Knock yourself out, asshole" (193). Ashley is ultimately arrested at the end of the night for attending prom after being banned by vice-principal Gilroy, but the judge dismisses her charges and even comments on how pretty and unique her prom dress is. Ashley ends her "magical" night by proclaiming, "Once upon a time there was a girl who got a life. Me." (210). By rejecting the popular culture version of Cinderella in which the princess waits passively for her Prince Charming to rescue her from an unpleasant situation, Anderson revises the beloved tale in order for Cinderella to save herself. By allowing Ashley to attend the prom without a date and still enjoy herself, Anderson's revision creates an imagined utopia where adolescent girls are no longer male identified or confined by the narratives of femininity produced by the culture industry.

After prom, Ashley's newfound empowerment does not end. When her mother gives birth to her little sister, Adrian, Ashley knows she has to set a good example for her:

Talk about a sucker punch. It hit me like a left hook out of nowhere that moving down to the basement would totally suck, and moving into a rat hole with someone like TJ would suck even more, and I had to find another way out of

there, but I didn't want to go too far, because this little girl needed me to show her the ropes and all. (213)

Ashley begins by enrolling in community college, paying all of the tuition herself, and aspiring to teach "normal" kids like her. By not buying into the idea that consumption allows her to express her individuality, Ashley is able to shape her own identity, present and future.

Ashley's character functions in the novel this way because, as Deszcz notes, "the fairy tale focuses on a quest for what has been stifled or denied, and stimulates in its readers the sense of real hope, happiness, and satisfaction" (30). Thus, *Prom* opens up a space of opposition to an exploitive culture industry by presenting an imagined alternative. Because of the structural and semantic elements of wishful thinking present in Anderson's retelling of Cinderella, *Prom* is an excellent vehicle for utopian messages facilitating rebellion against rampant consumerism and male identification.

My days of going to prom have long since past; I didn't live happily ever after with Justin Timberlake. However, I have yet to abandon fairy tales. Fairy tales have the power to foster alternative thinking that critiques contemporary social problems in a postmodern era in which alienation and greed are the norm. Because it is a serious piece of fantasy literature, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Prom* offsets the mindless superficiality advocated by the culture industry. Undermining the normalcy of the hoopla with the traditional high school prom, *Prom* negates spectacle and delusion. It gives me hope.

CHAPTER THREE

DYSTOPIA, LANGUAGE, AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Brechtian alienation is founded upon two a priori: first upon the possibility of representing reality; secondly upon the choice of language as a privileged instrument in a representation that seeks to transform society. – Feral, “Alienation Theory in Multi-Media Performance” (471)

Discussing *Feed* in a 2004 interview with Joel Shoemaker, M.T. Anderson remarks:

When I was a teen myself, I felt irritated and hounded by a youth culture that promoted gratification and the pursuit of a product-driven “cool” over things like curiosity, intellectual growth, and compassion... I was angry back then. I wanted to hear voices raised against the demands of the cool (99).

As a young teenager growing up in the 1990’s, I wasn’t quite as rebellious as Anderson. Instead of feeling anger toward the image of “cool” *Seventeen* prescribed for me, I simply felt frustrated. I fell in love with reading and academics during my early childhood, and my adolescence reflected the subsequent stereotype on a superficial level – I was awkward and chubby with short brown hair and braces, bookish, and a bit of a know-it-all; in other words, I didn’t look or act anything like Britney Spears, no matter how many times I wore the exact same pair of Sketchers I saw her wearing in her colorful ads in *Seventeen*. Justin Timberlake wasn’t calling, either.

M.T. Anderson’s dystopian young adult novel, *Feed* marshals a scathing critique of the dishonest and manipulative ideological framework of American consumer culture. According to Jack Zipes, “Dystopian literary works emanate from a critique of ‘postmodern’ advanced technological societies gone awry – and from a strong impulse for social change” (“Foreword”

ix). This impulse encourages adolescent readers to critique their own social milieu, and not just the values of the adult world.

In Anderson's cautionary tale, rampant consumerism and the instant gratification provided by the communication industry culminate in the implantation of a wireless internet access microchip called a "feed" into every young person and most of the adults living in the society. As Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons suggest, "the technology is called 'the feed,' a name that collapses corporate feeding of consumers (with products to fulfill their desires) and corporations feeding on the consumers in their relentless pursuit of wealth" (133).

Ironically, it is clear that the revolutionary microchip has an educational agenda. Titus, the novel's teenaged protagonist, explains:

People were really excited when they first came out with the feeds. It was all *da da da, this big educational thing, da da da, your child will have the advantage, encyclopedias at their fingertips, closer than their fingertips*, etc. (47 italics mine)

This sales pitch suggests any child with a feed can be "supersmart," regardless of intellect or work ethic (39). In a sense, the feed is marketed as a great equalizer. However, the technological "advancements" in communication brought about by the implementation of the feed result in a dystopian society in which ignorance, miscommunication, and alienation are the norm. Anderson illustrates this by presenting the manipulative language of various "banner" advertisements he strategically places throughout the text. This commercial language largely determines the language patterns of Titus, the novel's male protagonist, and his teenaged friends.

In order to evaluate the language Anderson uses to construct *Feed*, I will draw on Bertolt Brecht's concept of alienation effects to evaluate the novel. Josette Feral argues that Brechtian alienation is founded upon two *a priori* assumptions, "first that it is possible to

[represent] reality” and second that the “choice of language is a privileged instrument in a representation that seeks to transform society” (471). Although the alienation effect is usually associated with a theory of stage acting, it can be understood and applied within a much larger theoretical framework. Feral stresses the fact that the “alienation effect is mainly a literary concept which is linked to a special vision of the relation between society and art” (463). She further proposes that the alienation effect is not specific to Brecht and can really only be understood within “a context in which links between actor, spectator, and social context are woven together by an omnipotent director or author” (461).

Feral defines the alienation effect as: “a process by which both theatrical and extra-theatrical phenomena are rendered strange, forcing the spectator to adopt a critical distance with regard to that which is given to see and hear” (461). Following Feral’s extra-theatrical definition of the alienation effect, I assert that links between character, reader, and social context in the world of *Feed* are woven together by an omniscient narrator who chooses alienating language in order to criticize American consumer culture. Although Titus is ostensibly the narrator of *Feed*, Anderson plays a silent part in the drama and is by no means absent. The pronounced commercial rhetoric running throughout *Feed* reflects Anderson’s disdain for “hyped up” commercials produced by the culture industry that are deliberately constructed to manipulate and deceive.

Because Anderson provides no authorial commentary or judgment and never speaks directly to the reader, he uses language itself as an important moral touchstone throughout the course of the novel. The way in which a character speaks or the specific language used to construct an advertisement or marketing device provides important clues for which values readers should align (or separate) themselves. In the dystopian world of *Feed*, language loses its

precision. Often times the language of the characters is vague, profane, or otherwise nonsensical.

On the book cover, Anderson remarks:

To write this novel, I read a huge number of back issues of magazines like *Seventeen*, *Maxim*, and *Stuff*. I listened to cell phone conversations in malls. People tend to shout. Where else could you get lines like, 'Dude, I think the truffle is totally undervalued'?

Hence, Anderson models the imprecise language in *Feed* after the ineloquent and ignorant speech patterns of contemporary society that surrounds adolescents.

Although the visual techniques of the stage differ considerably from the narrative conventions of a written text, the effect of alienation in general serves a didactic function. Feral argues:

In addition, alienation effect cannot be dissociated from a larger project that aims at social reform, a project that requires the participation of an informed spectator interacting with new and imaginative textual material. If either the social project, the spectator [the reader], or the text is missing, the process of alienation is inoperative. (462)

Alienation teaches the reader not to take the language, style, or content of the text for granted, as the medium (the narrative itself) is highly constructed and depends upon a plethora of cultural and economic conditions.

In terms of alienation theory, art is a process by which the contemporary world is rendered strange and unfamiliar. However, Feral points out that in terms of alienation,

The text becomes the most important factor to be considered. It is not surprising that such an aspect precludes the traditional mimesis of reality. From its inception,

it permitted the work of art to distance itself from reality. This dual relation of the text with reality in Brechtian alienation theory is quite important to stress – the text being at the same time a representation of reality and pointing at it as a representation. (466)

Anderson uses this very technique in order to construct the world of *Feed* as a catastrophic vision of the future, which is at once altogether strange, yet very familiar to the modern world readers inhabit. Discussing the way *Feed* functions as a dystopian novel, Anderson remarks, “I conceive of *Feed* as a novel that uses images from an imagined future in an almost allegorical way to discuss things we’re dealing with now” (100).

Discussing the broadcast media industry in the early 1950’s, Brecht himself saw the productions of the culture industry as “neither progressive nor regressive,” as they held the potential to operate “as a democratic, political, [and] public organ” within the context of a social and institutional framework (Silberman 450). However, Brecht almost intuitively seems to anticipate the use of the mass media by both the producers of consumer goods and the upper-middle class in general to isolate and lull the average consumer into complacency. Brecht recognizes, “the technological apparatus of the new media produces a social or socialized reality corresponding to the alienated forms of labor in capitalist society” (450).

Well over fifty years later, M.T. Anderson seems to anticipate the same sort of exploitation by the biotech and advertising industry, as did George Orwell in his adult dystopian novel, *1984*. Perhaps, the most frightening aspect of *Feed*, as Lauren L. Reber notes, is the fact that Titus behaves the way Winston Smith, protagonist of Orwell’s *1984*, behaves *after* he is brainwashed (43). Titus is never an outsider in his dystopian world. He never attempts to fight the feed and seems perfectly content with the fact that his life has been completely infiltrated by

the mass media. Even at the conclusion of the novel, Titus is not able to recognize his world for what it is – a nightmare.

Clearly indicting the Feed Corporation for Titus's distorted worldview, the novel's harsh satire mocks the language of American advertising. Anderson peppers the narrative space of *Feed* with various types of marketing in order to stop Titus's first person narration and fragment the story. These advertisements introduce holes in the narrative and block the linear way in which a traditional narrative would unfold based upon its own interior dynamics. Much like the songs in a traditional Brechtian play, the marketing in *Feed* serves chiefly to indicate to the reader that the narrative is a construction. Marc Silberman points out that Brechtian songs, like the ads in *Feed*, "are nested one within the other; they appear; they vie for recognition; they make themselves known to the audience [readership, in this case] decentering its perception. The effect of alienation is the result of their juxtaposition" (467-68).

While connected to the feed, Titus and the other characters in the novel are subject to a constant bombardment of advertisements, songs, and feedcasts that function much like internet banner ads or pop-up advertisements. Such corporately sponsored commercials, songs, and programs shape and stimulate the synaptic pathways of everyone implanted with the feed. Silberman explains the way in which commercials situate themselves within the context of commodity consumption:

Commercials manifest the medium in and of itself, using all its sensory potential for selling the very idea of commodity consumption. They combine quintessentially television's modes of representation and address: short, intense, precise, diverse, and consumer-oriented. (454-55)

However, information is not always unsolicited, as members of the society can virtually “chat” in pairs or groups, as well as research any topic by simply thinking about it. This gives members of the society the illusion of free will and heightens their belief in the naturalness of rampant consumerism.

Car advertisements are just one form of manipulative marketing that assault Titus and his friends on a daily basis:

*... attracted to its powerful T44 fermion lift with
vertical rise of fifty feet per second – and
if you like comfort, quality, and class,
the supple upholstery and ergonomically designed
dash will leave you something like hysterical.
But the best thing about it is the financing –
At 18.9% A.P.R.... (70)*

Anderson mocks the deceptive marketing of expensive, luxury cars that destroy the environment and increase road congestion under the guise of comfort and class. Key sensory words such as: “comfort,” “quality,” “class,” “supple,” and “ergonomically” situate the T44 within the context of a bourgeois lifestyle. Anderson’s skillful satire highlights the fact that the bourgeoisie pay an exorbitant rate (18.9%) both literally and figuratively for such a lifestyle, as these ads are clearly marketed towards Titus and the rest of his upper-middle class friends. Although the ad claims the “upholstery and ergonomically designed dash will leave you something like hysterical,” it is the irony of such an idiotic statement that is truly “hysterical” because the word is clearly misused (70). The only thing “hysterical” about the upholstery and dash of such a luxury vehicle is the

ridiculous financing rate the bourgeoisie pay in order to obtain it. The amount of debt consumers are left with leaves them “hysterical,” not the dash and upholstery.

Anderson is also particularly critical of the corporately based music industry, as it distributes “music” on the feed that has no regard for artistic expression or aesthetic value. One such song, “Bad Me, Bad You” is again rendered “strange,” in the Brechtian sense of the word, out of its sheer stupidity and pointlessness.

I like you so bad

And you like me so bad.

We are so bad

It would be bad

If we did not get together, baby,

Bad baby,

Bad, bad baby

Meg bad.”... (16)

However “strange” the chorus may be, it is undeniably akin to the 1996 hit song, “If You Want it to be Good Girl (Get Yourself a Bad Boy),” by the corporately sponsored and produced boy band, the Backstreet Boys:

If you want it to be good girl

Get yourself a bad boy

If you really want it good girl

Get yourself a bad boy

Get it like it could be, would be

Yeah like it should be

If you want it to be good girl

Get yourself a bad boy

Although the alliteration of “bad” and “baby,” “bad” and “boy,” and “good” and “girl,” are catchy, the choruses of both “songs” are far from clever, insightful, or meaningful. Furthermore, the words from one popular song can almost be completely interchanged with the words from another.

Unlike original, imaginative music that evokes elements of the fantastic, these popular songs are mechanical in the sense “that a given detail can be shifted from one song to another without any real effect on the structure as a whole” (Storey 53). This standardization is concealed by the culture industry through a pseudo-individualization of sorts in which consumers forget that the music they are listening to is already pre-digested. The passive consumption of such pre-digested music promotes passive listening in its endless repetition. Instead of artistically imagining the world as it could be, such intensely commercialized music simply confirms the world as it is. Such consumption demands mindlessness and distraction, as it produces these psychological conditions within consumers (53).

As a result, Anderson makes “no concessions for mass-marketed idiocy, the goopy self-congratulation of boy-bands and starlets” (99). Justifying his disdain, Anderson rationalizes:

[The corporate music industry has] charts that show which chords are most thumbs-up. Music is marketing. They have lists of key changes that get thirteen-year-old girls screaming. There’s no difference between a song and an advertising jingle anymore. Songs are their own jingles. (100-01)

Therefore, it is no coincidence Anderson entitles his parody, “Bad Me, Bad You.” The song is obviously “bad” in both a literal and figurative sense; the pun is absolutely intended. It

discourages the reader from becoming too emotionally involved in the illusory narrative world of *Feed* and with characters that enjoy such “music.”

As Bullen and Parsons point out, “the novel’s satire is particularly biting in relation to adults, namely, politicians and parents, and the failure in their duty of care to their children and their citizens” (137). Anderson lampoons adults as well, pointing out that “the difference between generations is one of linguistic fashion rather than maturity or political awareness” (137). The adult characters in *Feed* use language that is as imprecise and sophomoric as their teenage counterparts. While vacationing on the moon, Titus and his friends’ feeds are attacked by a hacker in a dance club. In order to gain information, the hacker temporarily disconnects the teenagers from their feeds. While in the emergency room, Titus’s doctor asks him, “Could we like get a thingie?” (57) Such off-putting language alienates readers from the adult characters in the novel, encouraging them to engage in their own critical thought outside of established “adult,” capitalist political ideologies.

Anderson’s indictment of President George W. Bush is blatantly obvious through the presidential feedcasts which are found throughout the narrative. The feedcasts function as advertisements, if not only to explicitly advertise commerce.

... which the President denied in an address early on Tuesday. “It is not the will of the American people, the people of this great nation, to believe the allegations that were made by these corporate ‘watch’ organizations, which are not the majority of the American people, I repeat not, and aren’t its will. It is our duty as Americans, and as a nation dedicated to freedom and free commerce, to stand behind our fellow Americans and not cast... things at them. Stones, for example. The first stone. By this I mean that we shouldn’t think that there are any truth to

the rumors that the lesions are the result of any activity of American industry. Of course they are not the result of anything American industry has done. The people of the United States know, as I know, that that is just plain hooey. We need to remember... Okay, we need to remember that America is the nation of freedom, and that freedom, my friends, freedom does not lesions make.” The President is expected to veto the congressional... (85)

Bullen and Springer emphasize that such a feedcast is “dishonest, evasive, and filled with overblown rhetoric including the repeated use of the phrase “the American people” (137). The word “American” is repeated seven times, and the word “freedom” is repeated four times, three times in the same sentence. The speech vilifies “corporate watch” organizations that make an attempt to fight the feed, while validating the ignorant majority that blindly accept the consumerist message of the mass media. Furthermore, the address is unintelligent and unprofessional, as it contains sentence fragments and colloquialisms such as, “hooey.” Bullen and Springer highlight the soothing effect such speech-making has on the public at large and connect it to contemporary politics by referencing the fact that Harold Pinter’s acceptance speech for the 2005 Nobel Prize made direct allusion to the dangerously lulling effect such words have on a populace which prefers to stand by (137).

Because of the constant influence of the mass media, it is clear Titus has lost the ability to distinguish representation from reality. While waiting for his feed to be repaired, Titus remarks:

I missed the feed. I don’t know when they first had feeds. Like maybe, fifty or a hundred years ago. Before that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body. They carried them around outside of them, in their hands, like if you carried your lungs in a briefcase and opened it to breathe. (47)

Undoubtedly, the ubiquitous corporate entity that maintains the feed keeps firm control over the masses through the seeming “naturalness” and necessity of the feed. As Feral explains:

“Continually forced to reproduce reality with exactitude, the media substitute themselves for reality, by swallowing it up. Henceforth, a mediated reality is only appearance, illusion, viewpoint, and vanishing point” (470). As Bullen and Parsons argue, Titus “can only describe his experience and his world according to capitalist logic and language” (138).

Because Titus and his friends have unlimited access to information and are constantly bombarded by corporate marketing, they lose the ability to think critically for themselves. As critic James Blasingame puts it, the characters “have unwittingly become little more than cattle feeding on whatever the faceless creators of what comes over the ‘the feed’ send their way” (*Feed* 89).

Titus seems to enjoy not having to work hard or think deeply about anything. He unwittingly remarks:

That’s one of the great things about the feed – that you can be supersmart without ever working. Everyone is supersmart now. You can look things up automatic, like science and history, like if you want to know which battles of the Civil War George Washington fought in and shit. (47)

Ironically, it is the diction, syntax, and grammar Titus uses to discuss the feed which suggests he is anything but “supersmart.” “Supersmart” is not even a word, and Titus clearly does not understand how or when to use adverbs, as he does not understand when it is appropriate to use the word “automatic” as opposed to “automatically.” Furthermore, Anderson seems to suggest the feed makes everyone “superdumb” because Titus believes George Washington fought in the American Civil War. Vapid and ignorant, Titus is difficult to identify with on an emotional or

intellectual level. However, despite his limitations, readers are able to somewhat empathize with Titus, even if it is simply to pity him.

Anderson deliberately constructs Titus's language as "strange," while at the same time rendering it vaguely reminiscent of that of a typical American teenager. The estrangement readers experience while trying to identify with Titus allows them the ability to intellectually understand his dilemma and the wrongdoings of a society that produces such dilemmas without condoning Titus's ignorance or society's inaction. Making the familiar strange serves a didactic purpose; it empowers young readers on an intellectual level to challenge and analyze the assumptions they believe to be true about the world around them, while at the same time presenting them with an emotionally disturbing image of what the future may become.

The only character within the world of *Feed* who does not fit the profile of a "normal" American consumer is Titus's intelligent girlfriend, Violet. The two meet while on vacation on the moon. Violet is different from Titus and the other teenagers in the novel because she does not receive her feed microchip as an infant. Instead, her chip is implanted when she is seven years old. Violet's father, a professor of "dead" languages (like COBOL and BASIC), does not have a feed at all; he uses the internet through a portable unit he accesses with virtual reality glasses. Although he is capable of complex speech, Violet's father does not escape Anderson's parody. When he first meets Titus, he greets him by saying:

The sarcasm of my daughter notwithstanding, it is nonetheless an occasion of great moment to meet one of her erotic attachments. In the line of things, she has not brought them home, but chosen instead to conduct her trysts at remote locales.

(150)

Such exaggerated and pretentious language alienates readers from an adult academic that seemingly has all the answers, further encouraging young readers to think critically about the adult world and its politics.

As a result of her delayed exposure to the feed, Violet's language is distinctly articulate and sophisticated. Unlike the other teens, Violet has the ability to think critically for herself; she alone is able to observe the destructiveness of the feed:

No one with feeds thinks about it, she said. When you have the feed all your life, you're brought up not to think about things. Like them never telling you that it's a republic and not a democracy. It's something that makes me angry, what people don't know about these days. Because of the feed, we're raising a nation of idiots. Ignorant, self-centered idiots. (113)

Violet protests the feed by refusing to cooperate in creating a "personalized" consumer profile. She deliberately makes her buying history unpredictable. However, her resistance ultimately results in her downfall, as she dies because FeedTech refuses to repair her feedware; the corporation does not feel she would be "a reliable investment" based on her sporadic previous buying history (247). In the world of *Feed*, unbridled capitalism symbolized by the feed makes people commodities instead of individuals.

Some critics may find it odd that Anderson chooses to direct his dismal critique of capitalism towards a young adult readership. Children's literature scholar Kay Sambell explains that traditionally children's writers and young adult authors have a perceived "ethical duty to protect young readers' idealism." (165) Certainly Anderson's novel does anything but promote a cheerful optimism. However, it should come as no surprise that Anderson selects the genre of science fiction to marshal his critique of capitalism, as science fiction first and foremost works as

“a means of understanding a particular historical present” (Thacker 156). Indeed, Anderson’s *Feed* is pertinent to a historical present contemplating “new lines of automated software-driven DNA sequencing machines [and] the generation of financial investment for the promises of biotech startups” (Thacker 157). Science fiction provides a distanced space through language in which to critique a very possible future.

Despite its bleak ending, Bullen and Parsons point out there is an impulse toward hope in *Feed*. They argue:

Happy endings are typically comfortable solutions. But to leave the reader grimly contemplating Violet’s wasted life, is to leave them considering and questioning how this came about. Violet’s narrative punishment encodes within itself the call to action that the novel makes. In this respect *Feed* is accurately dedicated “to all those who resist the feed.” (137)

They further make clear, “children are emblematic of the future by virtue of the lives ahead of them. In the popular imagination they provide an impetus for social change, and their very existence offers a sense of hope for the future” (127). Their insight is interesting, considering Hintz and Ostry’s argument that, “Utopian and dystopian fiction does give teenagers an important Romantic characteristic, as they often save the world from destruction. This literary pattern reverses a social hierarchy in which real children and young adults are at the bottom” (10). Because adolescence is a constructed space in which teenagers crave freedom and control, dystopian fiction, such as *Feed*, serves as an important tool in teaching students how “to address cultural anxieties and threats as well as to contemplate the ideal” (Hintz and Ostry 12).

Feed provides a narrative space where adolescent readers may not only come to recognize the injustices rampant in American consumer culture, but actively fight to change

them. By dedicating his novel “To all those who resist the feed,” Anderson clearly “[demonstrates] to humanity the end point of the course on which they are headed has within it the implicit hope that the disastrous outcome can be averted” through the political activism of young adults (Bullen and Parsons 137). By dedicating the book to young adult readers, Anderson works to change the world by cleverly subverting the culturally constructed marketing category of young adult literature, as the book is anything but “childish.” Anderson wishes to jolt a generation of Disney “tweens” and MTV teens out of their complacency through his highly stylized language and clever parodies of all-too-familiar commercials.

Furthermore, Anderson concludes the novel with the clever phrase – “Everything must go” in tiny print (300). This is plainly the language of revolution, as “everything” in Titus’s world literally “must go” if anything about his society is to be redeemed. As cultural critic John Storey relates the famous words of Karl Marx in his book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (47). Clearly, Anderson uses the realm of dystopian science fiction to encourage young readers to actively resist the wanton consumption of a culture created by a global electronic and print media system.

Although my conservative, private middle and high school was far from the nightmarish dystopia of *Feed*, I learned as a young teenager that if a person behaves like an individual he or she is often punished. Resistance to conformity, however heroic, was rarely rewarded. However, I find hope embodied in the process of actively resisting a future like the one Anderson presents in *Feed* and encouraging my future students to do so, as well. Although it presents a formidable challenge, defying the feed of the culture industry is always the right and courageous thing to do; it is always worth the fight.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION:

FINDING HOPE IN FANTASY:

YOUNG ADULT UTOPIAN/DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

Fantasy of any kind provides young adult readers with a significant discourse on hope. Utopian and dystopian fiction are an important part of this discourse, as they make a major contribution toward understanding the ways in which fantasy provides a space to imagine a more just society and to make real meaning in a superficial culture obsessed with consumerism. However, because youth culture is a terrain of ideological struggle, children's texts are not inherently hopeful. For example, when a beauty editor uses the phrase, "Once upon a time..." as a caption to a fashion spread in *Your Prom*, the phrase has a very different meaning than when Anderson uses the phrase to open her novel, *Prom*. The editor uses the phrase to invoke the imagery and nostalgia of the popular culture Cinderella story in order to convince adolescent girls to buy certain commodities, while Anderson uses the phrase to indict the way the culture industry associates female passivity with both consumerism and fairy tales. As we see, the act of articulation, or the process of making meaning, is a social practice between reader and text.

The meaning adolescent readers make from utopian and dystopian fiction informs readers and organizes action. It provides a place for both adolescents and adults to address cultural anxieties and threats. In particular, fairy tales serve a utopian purpose, projecting "the wish and possibility for human autonomy and eros and proposed means to alter the world" (Zipes, *Happily Ever After* 3) Dystopian fiction, on the other hand, presents an image of a "nonexistent future society built on idealistic utopian dreams that have failed" (Reber 5). These dystopias usually center on perverted ideals of the adult world. Designed to be nightmarish, they encourage

adolescent readers to change the wrongs around them and to resist the hopelessness of the adult world.

There are certainly “totalitarian” aspects to any form of fantasy. The culture industry permeates almost every aspect of young adults’ lives, taking over art and infiltrating both socialization and education. However, it is undeniable that adolescents make their own meaning from the products produced by the culture industry. The culture industry itself is neither a monolithic body, nor is it non-contradictory. Instead, like any structure, it both constructs and enables agency. Furthermore, it would be crude and simplistic to assume that the effects of consumption always mirror the intentions of the culture industry. There is always a dialogue between the products of mass culture and the adolescent consumers of it.

Popular culture texts contain a variety of potential meanings; they can range anywhere from deeply subversive to downright civilizing, and anything in between. Youth culture is ultimately what adolescents make from the commodities and commodified practices made available to them through the culture industry. However, recognizing the fact that adolescents have the power to make their own meaning from these products is not to deny that the culture industry does not revolve around profit, power, and pleasure, conspiring to make adolescents better consumers instead of better people.

This is particularly frightening when we consider, as Zipes notes, “that in studies of popular culture, critics generally exclude children when they talk about ‘the people’ who consume all sorts of cultural artifacts or make liberating use of them” (*Happily Ever After* 8). Indeed, “the intersections between so-called children’s art and adult art are rarely studied” (*Happily Ever After* 8). Because of this, children’s literature, is often dismissed and left off of many classroom syllabi altogether. The unspoken belief is that the books children read are at best

non-canonical and unimportant and at worst subversive and disrespectful to the authority of the adult world. Many traditional educators and scholars fail to recognize that young adult literature is indeed political and has much to tell us not only about children, but about ourselves.

Pleasure is without a doubt political. However, pleasure and politics can be very different. Just because a young woman enjoys the frivolous escape afforded by a *Seventeen* magazine does not mean she will be unable to recognize the literary merit and appreciate the skillful satire of *Prom* and *Feed*. In other words, lightheartedly enjoying some of the products produced by the culture industry does not determine one's political inclinations. One may certainly take pleasure in admiring the beautiful prom dresses in *Your Prom*, while at the same time acknowledge the absurdity of the way the culture industry commandeers the Cinderella fairy tale in order to sell mass commodities in these magazines. Recognizing this fact refutes the contention that particular patterns of consumption determine the ethical and political affiliation of an individual. However, this is not to say that we should not teach young adults how to make astute aesthetic and intellectual judgments about the texts they encounter.

Despite the fact that teaching literature in the classroom requires making some judgments about texts, many critics assert that the notion of establishing a canon should be banished altogether. They argue it establishes a false, hegemonic universality of experience that is "arrived at by social negotiation among the arbiters of taste" (Sarland 125). According to these critics, canon formation perpetuates a tradition of literary study and history that is not only context-free, but apolitical and ahistorical, as well. As Jack Thomson notes, traditional canons often ignore differences in class, race, gender, politics, and religion (193). Furthermore, they tend to transmit the ideologies of authors and academics in positions of social authority.

Convincing research suggests that students have been taught to hate the traditional classics by the very process that was designed to endear them to “great” literature. A divide seems to exist between “the text that provokes official respect and the text that provokes unofficial love” (Stimpson 588). By creating and instituting hierarchies of pleasure, traditional scholars and educators teach students from an early age that their likes, dislikes, feelings, and opinions do not matter. According to Stimpson, the reasons scholars advocate teaching canonical literature exclusively include:

the desire of critics to push criticism closer towards science; the strength of cognitive traditions of criticism that prize philological skills or interpretative performances; the cult of the impersonal and conceptualizing literary voice; the influence of psychoanalytic theories about desire, in which [actually] loving a book might be the outward and visible sign of sublimation or fetishism; and, finally, the movement of criticism into academic departments that reward upright writing and thinking. (588)

As a result of such repression, students learn to discount their own pleasure because they fail to gain the enjoyment promised to them by the established classics. Ericson argues, “To limit our selections of novels, especially to the ‘classic’ novels, is to tell our students that all these other texts, perhaps the students’ preferred types of reading have less value” (10). Consequently, students are sometimes left bored and disengaged.

Noted scholar Catharine R. Stimpson’s conception of the “paracanon” is helpful in situating quality children’s literature in the context of a traditional literary canon and a hierarchy of pleasure. According to Stimpson, “Texts are paracanonial if some people have loved and do love them” and include both traditionally “canonical” and “non-canonical” works alike

(585). Thus, “Being loved is the way into a paracanon of the present, having been loved the way into those of the past” (585). By expanding the theoretical idea of “the good” to include “the lovable,” Stimpson turns the idea of one set canon on its head. She subverts the ideology that books “liked by the few” are “quality,” whereas books “liked by the many” are “rubbish” (Sarland 116). Instead, she argues for an alternative paracanon that while it may show that “the canon” is both a house of orthodoxy and a house of cards” negotiates a coexistence based on commonalities and differences” between the canonical and the paracanonical (585).

In this way, the paracanon’s principle of inclusion has the ability to inspire any reader’s love by constructing a body of works “that float beside, beneath, and around any canonical arrangements that a culture might have in place to hoard and board up art, literature, and the media” (592-593). Hence, a number of ways to organize and evaluate cultural works emerges and the arbitrariness of “literary value” becomes clear. As a result of the formation of a paracanon, “love and pleasure” are reclaimed for criticism” (589).

The notion of the paracanon is particularly important when considering the incorporation of young adult literature into the classroom. Gibbons, Dali, and Stallworth argue young adult literature (YAL) appeals to an adolescent readership for a variety of reasons:

[YAL] is written about characters with whom [adolescents] can identify based on issues such as age, conflicts, and world perceptions. It is fast-paced and will hold students’ attention in a rapidly increasing technological society where their world literally flashes before their eyes through television, video games, and computer images. YAL also includes a growing body of work that represents different ethnic and cultural groups, reflective of our ever-growing diverse society. (56)

Besides engaging students, YAL admitted into the paracanon offers students the opportunity to confront important social issues. Lois T. Stover and Bonnie O. Ericson point out that quality YAL “deals with themes and issues that mirror the concerns of the society out of which it is produced. It does so in ways that help readers understand the complexities and shades of gray involved in dealing with these issues” (119-120). As a result, YAL affords students the opportunity to make personal connections between their learning in the classroom and their own social situations.

Stimpson stresses that it is inadequate to describe paracanonical love as a “private transaction,” as “social and cultural forces do have a hand in the structuring of subjectivity and the intricate domains of desire, intimacy, and love” (586). Consequently, by recognizing themselves and their own culture through the language, historical setting, and thematic elements of contemporary YAL, students learn to recognize injustice, critique the status quo, and question social norms.

Using the paracanon to incorporate YAL into the classroom makes further sense in light of the research done by Deborah Stevenson. Stevenson notes that “Literary critics are not the only professionals with authority over children’s literature, as educators and librarians have studied and distributed the genre for years” (113). For years, librarians were the premiere scholars of children’s literature, influencing distribution, marketing, and readership (113). Furthermore, critic Charles Sarland notes, “Children and young people too engage in the social construction of canons, which involves a number of factors, including the views of their peers, their older siblings, their parents, and the publishing and video industries” (125).

Interestingly enough, Stevenson highlights the fact that the judgments of “amateurs” has factored heavily in the determination of the “non-professional canon of children’s literature.

Stevenson uses the word “amateur” in both the original meaning of the word, “one who does it only for love” and its contemporary definition, “a person inexperienced or unskilled in a particular activity” which factors most prominently in the popular conception of children’s literature (113). Stevenson ultimately concludes that it is these amateurs who determine the vast majority of books that are passed on to children and adolescents. Perry Nodelman himself admits to initially ignoring the likes and needs of actual children when assembling his first children’s literature class syllabus in the early 1970’s (4). Writing a decade later, he notes the importance of respecting those “who can speak with some confidence about what children need or like in literature” (4).

As a future educator, I believe all literature (canonical, non-canonical, and paracanonical alike) affords students the opportunity to make connections between academic learning and personal experience. However, my chief goal as an educator is to, as Roderick McGillis states, “keep readers awake to the possibilities of reading” (204). Based upon my current research, I see every reason to discuss a variety of literature from a variety of different critical perspectives with my students. My difficult task as a teacher in the 21st century is to find creative ways of incorporating canonical and paracanonical texts into my classroom curriculum.

Recent curriculum research provided by Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth in the Summer 2006 edition of the ALAN Review suggests that contemporary children’s literature and young adult literature (YAL) provides an interesting way to engage students in meaning-making in the English classroom. After interviewing various high school teachers in southern Alabama and reviewing educational and psychological research, Gibbons, Dali, and Stallworth argue that YAL should be integrated into middle and high school curriculums because it can:

(a) help improve students' reading skills; (b) encourage young adults to read more books, thereby improving their abilities to read; (c) facilitate teachers' abilities to incorporate more books of interest to adolescents into the curriculum, thereby avoiding the non-reading curriculum or workbooks and lectures; and (d) support the development of an inclusive curriculum. (53)

Inevitably, various implied readers will read the same text differently based upon personal and cultural experiences. Furthermore, the same reader never reads the same text the same way twice. Because YAL has expanded to include multiple genres such as poetry, biography, memoir, science fiction, as well as fantasy, teaching it in my classroom is the best way to engage the largest number of my students without sacrificing literary merit, complexity, or pleasure.

However, because teachers often center their classroom reading lists on "classic" literature in order to meet specific curricular objectives, such as identifying literary devices, learning new vocabulary words, and teaching critical reading skills, many argue YAL is simply not "deep enough" to occupy a prominent position in already overcrowded classroom curriculums (Gibbons, Dali, and Stallworth, 55). Many traditional scholars and educators insist that although more relevant to students' lives, contemporary YAL is "easier" and is only useful "as an option for struggling upper elementary and middle school students or as out-of-school leisure reading (Gibbons, Dali, and Stallworth 53). They believe it has no place in serious academic study. This attitude does a dangerous disservice to both advanced and "reluctant" readers. Advanced students are deprived of a wealth of reading they may actually enjoy and respond to, while less advanced readers are demeaned. The insinuation is that these "reluctant" readers *will not* read because they *cannot* read (Monseau xi).

As literary theorist Roderick McGillis notes, such prejudice takes one of two forms:

1) it results in a sentimental attitude on the part of those who wish to see these books as somehow free of social and ideational content, expressing instead a healthy playfulness redolent of a time in which delight remains supreme; or 2) it results in a refusal to take these books as serious reflections on various issues or as participating in the social and fashioning of readers. (202)

The first is usually held by adolescent educators and others who are not professional critics; the second is typically expressed by academicians who teach canonical literature (204). This prejudice is not surprising when we consider, as Virginia Monseau points out, that African American literature, women's literature, working class literature, and the literatures of other groups labeled as minorities were initially received by the literary establishment with extreme skepticism (xiii).

In classrooms preoccupied with the anxiety of meeting state and national standards, traditional critics are doubtful that children's literature and (or) YAL has the ability to provide both the complexity, aesthetic quality, and breadth of knowledge in literary studies that students need to excel on standardized tests. However, as Peter Hunt argues, "Texts do not, in themselves, teach anything. They contain potential meanings structured in complex linguistic and semantic code systems. Our access to those meanings depends on our decoding skills" (213). Hunt's comment is also important when considering that "learning to read differs from reading to learn" (McGillis 126).

According to McGillis, learning to read is an organic process in which students learn to passively accept what the predominant culture at large presents as "valuable, desirable, and acceptable" (126). In classrooms where the focus is merely to teach students how to passively

“read,” memorize, and then regurgitate information on standardized tests, reading to learn is almost non-existent. Curriculum studies researchers

John H. Bushman and Kay Parks Haas make clear, performance on standardized tests does not equate to deep level learning nor does it necessarily illustrate what adolescents gain from reading literature (73). Gibbons, Dali, and Stallworth point out, “Competency exams measure the content students [can] draw from the text; they do not measure what students actually learned from reading literature, what they thought, and what questions it raised” (57).

In contrast to standardized testing and rote memorization, reading to learn requires students to question the texts they read and to connect them to their personal experiences. As Elizabeth Strehle notes, it is only when literature provides opportunities to make connections between learning and life that learning actually “moves from the cognitive into the social arena of self understanding (213). When students are encouraged to question the world around them and “read to learn,” they gain the ability to distance themselves from various forms of cultural production that influence their thinking. They gain the ability to think critically for themselves

By incorporating a paracanon that includes contemporary YAL into classroom curriculums, teachers can assist students in placing their personal pleasures within the context of larger cultural patterns. The theory of critical pedagogy is pertinent here. As McGillis asserts, “Critical reading is political, and political reading empowers readers to think and to judge. The responsible democratic [student] needs the power derived from an ability to think critically and to judge carefully” (204). Hence, it should come as no surprise that in the cultural pluralism of postmodern society different social groups create different canons, and these choices are indeed political (Sarland 125).

These different cultural groups “no longer wish to have others speak for them;” they wish to express their own autonomy, their own desire” (McGillis 203). Furthermore, they actively “seek to redress the modern tendency to homogenize the world or that other tendency that sees everything in sets of binaries” (McGillis 203). As a result, part of constructing any classroom curriculum will be identifying which texts fall outside of the traditional canon and into other paracanons and how these two canons can complement one another. However, there are both continuities and discontinuities between these various canons. As Sarland notes:

The continuities suggest that there is something in common to be found in the satisfaction gained when different people of different ages and with different interests and backgrounds read and/or view diverse canons; the discontinuities suggest the reasons why those different canons appeal to different groups. (129)

According to Stimpson, the fact that such continuities and discontinuities exist raises thought-provoking questions such as: “Why was *this* text loved? By whom? Was *this* text not loved, but hated, love’s demonic other? Why? By whom? And did *this* text find only indifference? Did it look for love in all the wrong places?” (599) Raising these important questions in class would undoubtedly encourage students to critique their present social and political milieu.

Engagement with interesting contemporary texts that provoke such discussion will inevitably result in far more personal and reflective writing and reading. All texts and subsequent readings are political. Therefore, locating Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Prom* and M.T. Anderson’s *Feed* within the larger theoretical framework of utopian and dystopian children’s literature is helpful in assessing the specific ways in which these texts aid students in thinking critically about American consumer culture. Utopian texts instill hope in adolescent readers. They provide them with productive places to truly engage with true fantasy, instead of fetishized commodity.

Through utopian and dystopian fiction, adolescents seek to imagine a society where the future is a vision of how the world *ought* to be, not the way it *is*.

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